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August 29, 2005

Immediate Release

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### **Plague Detected in Prairie Dog Colony**

ALBUQUERQUE – The Albuquerque Environmental Health Department's Bio-Disease Management program has received confirmation that plague has been detected in fleas collected at a prairie dog colony in the East Mountains.

Staff from the Bio-Disease Management program have been conducting an investigation of the colony after local residents reported that the prairie dogs had disappeared. The colony had been very active until recently, when residents noticed that the prairie dogs were no longer present.

On investigation, no carcasses were found at the colony. This is consistent with a plague epizootic, an outbreak of disease in a highly susceptible species of animal host. Nearly 100% of a prairie dog colony will die when plague is spread through the colony. When the animals become sick, they go back to their burrows, and die underground, leaving few or no carcasses above ground. Nearly 400 fleas were collected from the burrows, and sent to the CDC Division of Vector-Borne Infectious Diseases in Ft. Collins, CO to be tested for plague.

Plague is transmitted from host to host by several species of fleas. When the host animal dies, the fleas will aggressively seek a new host to feed on, increasing the chance of transmission of the disease to other animals, including humans or pets. Many of the fleas collected in this investigation were plague positive. This finding indicates that the prairie dog colony was wiped out by plague.

Additional fleas were collected from surrounding areas, and are being tested for plague. Results are expected soon. In mid-July of this year, a teenage boy from nearby in Santa Fe County was confirmed to be positive for plague infection. Prior to that case, the last human case in the state was in 2003, and there were two cases in 2002.

Plague is a bacterial infection, found in some animal populations in the southwest, especially in New Mexico and Colorado. Prairie dogs are considered a sentinel species for plague outbreaks due to their high level of susceptibility. Rock squirrels and other small mammals are also frequently involved in plague transmission. Plague can be treated with antibiotics if detected early.

The Bio-Disease Management staff recommends limiting risk of exposure to plague-carrying fleas, especially in the areas where the disease has been found in the past, in the Foothills east of Tramway, and in the East Mountains and Tijeras Canyon areas. People should avoid close contact with wild animals by not feeding, petting or otherwise approaching squirrels, prairie dogs or other small mammals. Infectious fleas can jump great distances between hosts. Dead animals suspected to be victims of plague can be reported to the Bio-Disease Management Program via the 311 system.

Please contact Dr. Mark DiMenna of the Albuquerque Environmental Health Bio-Disease Management Program at 873-6613 ext. 223 (office) or 263-3299 (mobile).